

## *Preface to the Second Edition*

WHEN THIS BOOK WAS FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1978, its assumption that Karl Kautsky's moderate, humanist interpretation of Marx was both more accurate and destined to be more enduring than the militant and dogmatic tradition of Lenin and his successors seemed to be contradicted by world realities. Communism — the Leninist twist of Marx's theory — was powerful not just in the Soviet Union and its east European satellites, but also in the so-called Third World. In Africa, Latin America, and Asia there were governments and parties that claimed to be communist, and thus Marxist. The Marxism of Kautsky and his contemporaries was at best something which time had passed by.

Now, a scant twelve years later, things have changed. Not only is communism on the retreat practically everywhere, but in its former strongholds, previously rejected interpreters of Marx are being looked at anew. This applies specifically to Kautsky, who for a long time was seen in the communist world as the leading proponent of the major tradition against which Leninism rebelled. It was, in fact, a work by Lenin, *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky* (1918), which established the orthodox communist view of Kautsky and, to a great extent, relegated him to nearly total obscurity for the next seventy years.

Rethinking Kautsky's place in the history of Marxism is important for a number of reasons. First, the enormous prestige and power of communism has led to acceptance of the identity of Marxism and communism, both popularly and among serious scholars in both the East and the West who should have known better. This view is a severe distortion of what Marx thought and wrote and does less than justice to the rich implications of his analysis of modern society. Both proponents and opponents of Marxism have taken liberties with Marx's own works and those of his immediate intellectual and political heirs, often to

exaggerate, sometimes to fabricate. Proponents usually sought to legitimize their own prejudices and drive for political power by donning the mantle of supposed Scientific Marxism. Opponents, similarly motivated by political prejudice, hoped to discredit the whole of Marx's heritage by identifying it with a particular, perverse interpretation. Closer focus on Kautsky's version of Marx's suggestions will help redress this imbalance.

Second, Kautsky in his own right deserves better treatment from the historical profession than he has received. He was the first person to try to translate Marx's theories into mass political action. As the preeminent theoretician of the German social-democratic movement in the years before the First World War, his pioneering efforts were given considerable substance by the success of the party as a political machine. Kautsky's experience with the prewar SPD provides a classic opportunity to study the interaction between theory and practice, to investigate the extent to which political behavior can be guided by a conscious commitment to an abstract theory. His close ties with the political leadership of the party, especially August Bebel, ensured that Kautsky's theory rarely descended into ivory-tower fantasizing. Furthermore, the comparatively broad spectrum of political thought represented in the SPD (broad especially in contrast to communist parties that developed later) guaranteed that his ideas had to compete freely and openly with those of many other critics of modern society. Prior to 1914, Kautsky won more theoretical battles than he lost, but his opponents were never murdered, never forced to recant their positions, and very rarely even left the party. Kautsky's Marxism neither called for nor depended upon a militant, monolithic party or state.

Finally, it is possible that the retreating forces of communism may now want to reevaluate the implications of Marx's works in light of the failure of their own systems. In this process, Kautsky's work could provide some guidelines. For instance, Kautsky was convinced that the development of modern capitalist society toward socialism could be forced only to a very limited degree. His recognition that Marx had held that the basis for socialism could only be laid by the maturation of capitalist society, and his willingness to tolerate divergent forces in society and within the party while this process went on, might help former communists to accept the necessity of a freer economic sphere without entirely abandoning their hopes for a more humane society. Surely under communism they have achieved neither material comfort nor the liberation of humanity from toil and oppression.

This is not to suggest that Kautsky was either a nineteenth-century *laissez-faire* liberal or a precursor of the Reaganite and Thatcherite supply-side economics that is based on the shameless exploitation of the

weak. Rather, he offered an interpretation of Marx that admitted the tremendous material potential of capitalism while simultaneously insisting upon the moral, intellectual, even spiritual superiority of socialism, and he linked the two—capitalism and socialism—through historical necessity. His unwillingness to abandon what he saw as the superior position of socialism in hopes of promoting the transition from capitalism—that is, his rejection of premature, violent revolution—is what has always so angered his less patient opponents within the movement, from Rosa Luxemburg and her left-wing sympathizers in the SPD prior to the First World War to communists of all stripes since. But Kautsky was both convinced of the futility of such efforts and appalled by the price they demanded.

The history of the twentieth century has shown that Kautsky's more peaceful approach probably would not have yielded the harmonious communist society foreseen by Marxian theory—none of the advanced industrial states of the West has developed along these lines. However, the violence and oppression of communist movements have also failed to achieve this goal. The self-admitted bankruptcy of the Soviet and eastern European communist regimes has made a mockery of the willingness to inflict such suffering in the name of a greater good. Kautsky's way might have meant compromise and partial measures, but it would not have brought the perversion of Marx's vision that communism has.

This second edition is being published without revision, which by no means is meant to suggest that the first edition had no weaknesses. Were I to rewrite a biography of Karl Kautsky, I would place a great deal more emphasis on four aspects of his thought and career. First, I would deal much more thoroughly with the relationship between the work of the young Kautsky and the rage for the biological science of the time, especially Darwinism. Although this subject was not neglected in the first edition, my own further work in Kautsky's early writings has suggested the need to deal with this topic at greater length. Second, I would write much more extensively about Kautsky's view of the nature of the revolution that was supposedly to lead from capitalism to socialism and about his vision of the future society. Third, I would spend more time describing and explaining Kautsky's place in the SPD, especially his reciprocal relationship with the political leadership of the party. Finally, I would expand the portion of the text which deals with Kautsky's life after the First World War with an eye to analyzing his relationship with Leninism.

Since 1978, several major studies focusing on Kautsky have appeared. Most notable among these are Massimo Salvadori, *Karl Kautsky and the*

*Socialist Revolution, 1880–1938* (London, 1979), a translation of the 1976 Italian original; Reinhold Hünlich, *Karl Kautsky und der Marxismus der II. Internationale* (Marburg, 1981); Hans-Jürgen Mende, *Karl Kautsky vom Marxisten zum Opportunisten* (Berlin, 1985); Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey, *Das Mandat des Intellektuellen: Karl Kautsky und die Sozialdemokratie* (Berlin, 1986); and Moira Donald, *Karl Kautsky and Russian Social Democracy, 1900–1914* (forthcoming). The first three prove just how polemical a topic Kautsky remains, while the last two show the very high promise of more reasoned reevaluation. All of these works have introduced new material and suggested new interpretations.

A conference held in Bremen in the fall of 1988 brought together some two dozen scholars from around the world who are working on Kautsky. John H. Kautsky, Karl's grandson, was guest editor of a recent issue of the *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* (30:1–2, Jan.–Apr. 1989), "Karl Kautsky and the Social Science of Classical Marxism." Taken together with the book-length studies that have appeared in the last ten or so years, all of this work expands considerably the amount of scholarly attention devoted to Kautsky.

Apart from two rather inaccessible studies done in Polish in the early 1970s by Marek Waldenburg, Salvadori's book and the first edition of the present work constitute the pioneering studies of Kautsky by scholars with some claim to objectivity. It is my hope that issuing a second edition of what is still the only biography available will attract new interest and stimulate further work. Now that the Leninist chokehold on the history of Marxism has at least been shaken, if not broken, by the obvious failure of the communist systems of eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, perhaps even more scholars will be encouraged to look more closely at the career and writings of the man who in his own time was often referred to as the "pope of socialism." Given the changes in the world scene of the past few years, historians should now be better able to judge Kautsky's contributions to the history of Marxism and the European working-class movement.